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SUBJECT: BONGO VISITS WIFE IN PARIS

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¶1. In June, Edith Lucie Bongo (the 42-year old wife of President Omar Bongo -- and daughter of Congo president Denis Sassou Nguesso) was evacuated to France, after apparently suffering a stroke. Since that time (with the exception of one 24-hour visit to Gabon in October), she has basically stayed in France. Her absence, which has never been explained publicly by the Presidency, has led to many rumors in Libreville, the latest of which claim profound depression and a recent attempt at suicide or suggest that Bongo has been discussing divorce proceedings with Sassou Nguesso.

¶2. Perhaps to counter such rumors, Gabon's semi-official national daily "l'Union" on December 27 featured three photos of Bongo, Edith and their children (Yacine and Omar Denis) during a Christmas-Eve party in Paris "at their private residence in the 7th arrondissement." The accompanying brief article indicates that Bongo will be back in Gabon for his traditional December 31 "message to the nation" speech (in fact, Bongo returned December 28). The article makes no mention of Edith's condition or plans.

¶3. For what it's worth, in the photos Omar Bongo does not appear in a particularly joyous mood. Edith is shown in three different positions (and two different outfits). In one photo she is sitting on a couch next to Bongo, in another, she is standing while shaking hands, and in a third she is perched on the arm of a chair alongside the children. The photos are undoubtedly meant to show that Edith is capable of movement and of functioning in a social setting. We report the items in detail as we are aware of Embassy Brazzaville's interest in the matter.

WALKLEY